

Histoire de la France contemporaine

Review Number:

1494

Publish date:

Thursday, 10 October, 2013

Author:

Aurélien Lignereux

ISBN:

9782021000832

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£20.00

Pages:

432pp.

Publisher:

Seuil

Publisher url:

<http://www.seuil.com/livre-9782021000832.htm>

Place of Publication:

Paris

Author:

Bertrand Goujon

ISBN:

9782021033472

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£20.00

Pages:

448pp.

Publisher:

Seuil

Publisher url:

<http://www.seuil.com/livre-9782021033472.htm>

Place of Publication:

Paris

Reviewer:

Pamela Pilbeam

These are the first two volumes of a new series, *Histoire de la France contemporaine*. They replace the previous Seuil series, published in the 1970s. As a reflection of the attitudes of current French academic specialists, they are interesting on two levels. Each is a careful synthesis of recent research on the two periods. In addition they indicate how the attitudes of French historians to their history have evolved since

the first series appeared. The variation in the starting dates of the two series is startling. The 1970s series began with the 1789 Revolution, whereas the new one starts with 1799. The French Revolution, which in the 1970s was still considered of seminal importance to France, Europe, indeed to the world, seems no longer to be ranked as the beginning of contemporary history. Presumably 1789 will figure as an ending rather than a beginning in the concluding volume of a new *Seuil Histoire de la France moderne*, which is apparently planned for 2015. While one can appreciate that the demise of Communism in Europe and the elimination of a Marxist interpretation of history, which up to the early 1970s dominated French views of contemporary history, necessitates a rethinking of 1789, it seems extreme to expunge the Great Revolution from contemporary history. A reader might reasonably wonder why the revolutionary baby is being thrown out with the Marxist bathwater.

Volume one, *L'Empire des Français 1799–1815*, focuses on the European significance of the Empire, making full use of the author's earlier study of the annexed departments together with the research of some British and Italian experts. Although all the massive conquests of 1792–1814 were lost in 1815 and within half a century new nation states had been forged, the author claims that this transient empire left a positive legacy for later French imperialism (perhaps in the cultural superiority evinced by some of the French conquerors, though this is never explained). This volume has four sections. Each chapter is subdivided thematically, although the basic structure is chronological. Part one presents a fairly familiar scenario. Napoleon's appointment as first consul in 1799 completed the Revolution; between 1802 and 1807 the Republic gradually faded and an Empire was constructed. Former supporters of the Directory backed Napoleon because they hoped to complete existing reform projects, because he offered them jobs and because a successful general was the best guarantee that French conquests would be retained and the civil war in western France brought to an end. Ordinary French people, were less enthusiastic; typically fewer than half of the voters took part in the plebiscites. By 1812 the new Empire (whose republican features soon faded) consisted of 130 departments administered by local elites, under the control of French officials. The Empire totalled 80 million people, including additional vassal states. Former émigrés were employed in senior posts, although their loyalty was dubious. The Concordat crumbled; the Pope refused to approve nominations to bishoprics within the Empire. From 1808 Napoleon lacked support within France for his imperial ambitions.

Part two deals with social issues. Society was managed by an amalgam of old regime and revolutionary features. Landed nobles and freemasons took a lead in the departments, often administered by former pre-1789 intendants, now called prefects. The Civil Code asserted patriarchal authority, but equal subdivision of property among heirs was decreed. New lycées and the centralized University educated the sons of bureaucrats (although they had spaces for only 10 per cent of the potential clientèle), but women's orders still provided schooling for girls. Local studies show that economic development was very limited. Just over 9 per cent of the land of France, often church property, was sold by the revolutionaries as *biens nationaux*. Peasants, who constituted three quarters of the 81 per cent living in the countryside, bought nearly 40 per cent, but mainly lacked the capital to move out of subsistence farming. Wealthy purchasers bought the best land and embarked on a modest number of agriculture initiatives, particularly sheep-rearing and sugar beet. Some state encouragement and the availability of former church property for cotton production, facilitated a little industrial growth, but the British control of the seas and the earlier loss of colonies were serious setbacks and left western coastal cities such as Bordeaux and Nantes impoverished.

Part three asks how the French regarded the Empire. Holding it together became a struggle. France was massively behind Britain in armaments' production. Between 1793 and 1815 Birmingham alone built a million rifles, more than was produced in the whole of France. The British were able to spend three times as much as the French on their technically far more advanced navy. However, although 1.3 million French soldiers were killed between 1792 and 1815 (as many as in the First World War), until 1812, when the war began to go badly, most French people were relatively unaffected by the war. Occupied countries furnished the French army with men, money and supplies. The cost of the army of occupation swallowed nearly 56 per cent of the Italian budget in 1813. From 1809 one-third of French regiments were staffed by foreigners, 700,000 in all. The war was blamed on England and portrayed as a patriotic and republican obligation, not

Bonapartist, although Napoleon commanded profound personal loyalty from his soldiers. Patriotism was stirred by the display of the Bayeux tapestry in Paris; Joan of Arc was remembered as a victim of England.

Although army officers had a leading role in running the conquered territories, the Empire was not a military dictatorship. Three quarters of officers were drawn from the ranks, but former émigré and bourgeois officers secured more rapid promotion. Better-off families paid for replacements. Up to 28 per cent of recruits simply failed to appear; a mere 52,000 of those enrolled were volunteers. The Russian campaigns tested patriotic loyalties; 300,000 men died of illness and cold. At first some may have believed that they were fighting a war of liberation, but some began to behave as cultural imperialists critical of decadent, priest-ridden Italians. Local elites were offered subordinate posts, but attempts to create French-speaking lycées, for instance in Turin, were abandoned. The introduction of French reforms of law and administration were unpopular. Curiously the author does not mention that French was the language of educated Europeans at this time.

The final part of the book deals with the 'Ends' of Empire. When the Allied military campaigns were launched in 1813, local elites quickly abandoned the French. In 1813–14 Napoleon was unable to amass the necessary reserves in men and money in France, but the Empire did not succumb to internal rebellion, except around Bordeaux. Napoleon's military defeat allowed the Allies to restore Louis XVIII. Despite his efforts to work with revolutionary institutions and Imperial personnel, the demobilisation of over 200,000 soldiers encouraged constant rumours of Napoleon's return from Elba. When this came, problems of how to finance a second Empire, gather enough troops to fight Allied armies, and combat both revolutionary and legitimist aspirations proved overwhelming. A second Empire was made impossible because attempts in the summer of 1815 to re-jig the autocratic Imperial constitution to sound even vaguely liberal, were unconvincing, but even more by the Allies' refusal to consider anything other than the removal of Napoleon. The *Marseillaise* was drowned by cannon in the *1812 Overture*.

This book works hard to live up to its title, 'the Empire of the French People'. The front cover shows a family pouring over a map of Europe, gripped by the successes of French armies in 1807. The text stresses negatives; that, once France had secured its 'natural' frontiers on the Rhine, Napoleon forced the French to accept conquests that they did not want. To explain the mismatch between Napoleon's ambitions and public opinion the author observes that between 1805 and 1814 Napoleon was in Paris for only 900 out of 3,500 days. In addition, the complex and hierarchical structures surrounding him made him unaware that his unceasing military ambitions, especially in Spain and Russia, were unpopular. Yet the French did not turn against Napoleon in 1814, and there was no active opposition to his return a year later. Napoleon as a person is a shadow in this volume. The assertion that his military ambitions were unpopular after 1808 demands first, some evidence of public opinion, and second, an explanation how Napoleon was able to persist with constant war. The author claims that Bonapartism did not exist until 1814. If not, what was Napoleon's appeal? The author seems to be accepting, contrary to his title, that, after 1808, the Empire was not that of the French people, but of Napoleon. If so, Napoleon, and especially how he was regarded, cannot be written out of the story, however much one might like to do so.

The period 1814–48 earned two volumes in the earlier *Seuil* series. Volume one was a general account, volume two a detailed analysis of the regions, making excellent use of the enormous local studies then being written by doctoral students. They are replaced by a single volume, *Monarchies postrévolutionnaires 1814–1848*, another challenging title. The approach is chronological and descriptive; prolific sub-headings reflect its broad range. Politics dominate, as indicated by the chapter headings, which are divided into predictable periods; the return of the White Flag, the struggle to achieve national reconciliation (1815–20), the ultra-royalist reaction, culminating in chapter four's rather dismissive title, 'From one monarchy to another'. Chapter five deals with the attempt of the July Monarchy to 'set down roots' (1832–40), while the final chapter runs through the 'slide to immobility of conservative liberalism'. The book ends abruptly with a very brief narrative of the February Revolution, 1848. The account of politics offers few shocks; the writer eschews interpretation and analysis. His underlying philosophy seems to be that political changes were the result of chance and that events can be left to speak for themselves. Occasionally he seems to stop in his tracks and offer a measure of interpretation, for instance the observation that the 1830 and 1848 revolutions

were the result of rather similar economic crises.

Where are the revolutions which until recently were the significant events in recent French history? Volume one ignored 1789 and volume two performs a similar sleight of hand with 1830 and 1848. But revolutions are not like white rabbits; they do not disappear. The title of volume two is assertively *post-révolutionnaire*. Yet both of the 'post revolutionary monarchies' fell prey to revolution. The period embraces two revolutions, 1830 and 1848, and several other episodes of popular unrest, in particular in Lyon in 1831 and 1834 and Paris in 1839. The 1830 revolution is no longer 'Three Glorious Days', but little more than a passing incident in the middle of a chapter. Revolutions appear here as rather embarrassing accidents, devoid of analytical substance. 19th-century revolutions may not have been Marxist, but they are still worth investigating, if only because revolutions, like the military dictator of volume one, remain serious concerns in the present day.

This volume is far more convincing and compelling when it moves away from politics. The period is shown as a time of wide-spread change. Goujon is particularly well-informed and interesting on economic developments and places commendable emphasis on regional variations. There is a very impressive guide to literary, artistic, religious and cultural developments. Philosophical matters are deftly explored. The complexities and variety in ultra-royalism and later in legitimism are so fully examined that the broad concepts almost melt away. However in the chapters on the Restoration, the ultras seem to swamp constitutional royalism, with the unspoken conclusion that the regime was indeed 'impossible', a view that has become popular in recent years, rather than a workable compromise torpedoed by a king and a small coterie out of touch with the country.

Charles X's replacement, his cousin Louis-Philippe, comes over as a shrewd manipulator, whose demise is in part explained because, as he grew older, he began to believe he was king 'because he was a Bourbon', rather than despite his family connections. The front cover picture challenges the title of the book, exposing monarchy as far from 'post-revolutionary'. It shows Louis-Philippe being offered the crown by the deputies, hemmed in by a turbulent crowd, with national guard banners waving, emphasising the novelty and danger of choosing a king. His heir, the duc d'Orléans, a man of radical liberal views, would have welcomed this element of choice, and if he had lived, the regime might have survived. The fate of monarchy may have turned on his death in a coaching accident in 1840, leaving an infant son. Louis-Philippe was well aware how precarious his death made the regime, which may explain his personal withdrawal into the 'hereditary' myth of one of the later paintings of him and his sons, in which the dead elder son appears. Historians tend to be too fatalistic when judging early 19th-century monarchies. Orleanism as a concept slips between the cracks of the last two chapters. There is a musty tinge to the reiteration that the Orleanist regime was held together by self-interest, given that historians now assert that the philosophy and personnel of the successful Third Republic in the 1870s was partly drawn from the ideas of former Orleanist liberals.

The emergence of ideas on social reform is realistically presented. The author succinctly distinguishes between the different early socialist tendencies and tries to explain to whom Saint-Simonism, Fourierism, Leroux, Blanc, Cabet etc. appealed. Republicans pop up where one would expect, but a fuller account of the various strands would have been useful. The February revolution appears from almost nowhere. A more analytical concluding chapter is needed, but perhaps the absence of conclusions is a design feature of the series. Volume one wound down merely with a reference to music written about the Empire.

Both volumes provide well-chosen bibliographies of recent monographs. Volume one contains a references to some research published in English, volume two very little, which is surprising given that the author's next book is on European elites. Both volumes mention the work of recent historians, but with no footnote references. Unfortunately on a number of occasions the historians mentioned in the text do not appear in the bibliography. Volume one contains a few references to contemporary sources, which are footnoted; volume two cites no original material. While the target audience for the series may include the 'general' reader who may not want a guide to further reading, surely this series is mainly directed at undergraduate and postgraduate students, who will need guidance and ought to find the gaps in references frustrating. The 1970s series was published in English by Cambridge University Press and some of the volumes became an

essential guide for English-speaking undergraduates. The new series will need some modifications if it is to fulfil a similar function.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1494>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/70964>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/70965>